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ABSTRACT

The issue of a national assessment tool in the form of national testing has recently gained momentum. The expectation is that tough national tests would raise national standards and improve educational equity. The goals are ambitious ones and the stakes are particularly high for disadvantaged youth who currently experience the worst effects of testing practices and an inequitable education system. Even current levels of time and money spent on preparation for and administration of standardized tests may have some of the following consequences: (1) narrowed curriculum; (2) teaching that resembles the tests; (3) downgraded teaching skills and stifling of creativity; and (4) tracking of students with the lowest scores (often minorities) into lowest performing classes. Prominent on the current political scene is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Those who criticize the NAEP focus on the issue of national versus local control. Several alternative proposals are currently being offered. Recommendations for the development of a national, state, or local assessment system of interest particularly for those advocating educational advancement for minorities fall into the following areas: (1) representation and diversity; (2) teacher involvement; (3) parent involvement; (4) standards before tests; (5) development beyond standardized tests; (6) assessment to improve instruction; (7) access for limited-English and handicapped students; (8) monitoring for fairness; (9) de-emphasis of "high stakes"; (10) no tracking; (11) clear reporting of results; (12) reporting school accountability; (13) improvement of education; (14) community and state accountability; (15) adequate time to create an effective system; and (16) sufficient resources for the system's development and implementation. The need for local perspectives is also clear. (JB)

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National Testing: The National Debate

Along with school choice, the idea of a nationwide testing through a national assessment system has gained political currency. Although the debate over choice has been louder, the issue of a national assessment has gained more momentum and consensus among political leaders and educators. Many people, including politicians and educators, envision a national assessment of tougher standards as the driving force behind educational reform. Tough national standards will raise expectations to world-class levels while also improving educational equity, as all students receive a quality education, they say. Young people who graduate from the "new American high school" will be ready for more than a dead-end job; they will be equipped to develop new skills and continue as life-long learners.

The goals are ambitious ones and require great changes in instruction, political will and educational structure to carry them out. The stakes are particularly high for disadvantaged youth, who currently experience the worst effects of testing practices and an inequitable education system.

Current Uses of Testing

A recent Ford Foundation study found that 20 million school days and $100 million tax dollars are spent each year on preparation for and administration of **standardized tests**. In the 1989-90 school year, 47 states mandated school districts to administer tests to their students.

Despite their popularity, there is great dissatisfaction with the results of all this testing and with the standardized format of the tests themselves. Both the structure and the uses of the exams are criticized for decreasing the quality of instruction and available opportunities for many students. This is especially so when they are **high stakes** exams--that is, tests whose results are used to make important decisions about students, teachers, and schools. Many researchers have reported the following consequences of high stakes standardized testing:

* The curriculum is narrowed to cover only those topics on the exam. If a skill or area of knowledge is not tested, it gradually is removed from the curriculum.

* The manner in which the children are taught increasingly resembles the standardized tests. Skills are broken down into small basic units presented in test format rather than in ways that develop more complex, higher-order thinking skills. Carol Ascher of Columbia University's Teachers College finds that "teaching to the test" alienates students from the learning process.

* Teachers' skills are downgraded or never developed, and creativity is stifled. Linda Darling-Hammond of Teachers College points out that standardized tests reduce the teachers' role to that of semi-skilled laborers who carry out a prescribed curriculum, rather than experts in pedagogy or child development.

* Academic placement according to the results of standardized tests is criticized for contributing to the disproportionate placement of minority children into the lowest-performing classes, a process known as "tracking". Ascher also finds that the high stakes testing environment for schools causes limited-English-proficient children to be tracked into slower or learning disabled classes in order to exclude their scores from the school or class average so that the schools can compare more favorably with others in their state or region. Tracking and in-grade retention have been shown to have highly detrimental effects on the education of students. Children who are retained have a much higher propensity for dropping out later on.

Many educators, critical of standardized testing, are developing **alternative assessments** designed to eliminate what they view as the more detrimental

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effects of standardized testing and also to provide better information about what students know. This developmental surge in the educational community has been met with interest by policy makers.

The Political Climate

National Assessment of Educational Progress

Some sort of national assessment is implicit in the six National Education Goals agreed upon by the President and the nation's governors at their Education Summit in 1989. Goal 3 states that American children should leave 4th, 8th and 12th grades having demonstrated skill in five core subjects, while goal 4 says they should be first in the world in the areas of math and science by the year 2000. Clearly this requires some sort of mechanism to measure their progress.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a Congressionally authorized and supervised examination designed to measure students' knowledge and skills. Currently, NAEP tests a small sample of students, each one taking only a portion of the entire exam. Because NAEP is not a high stakes exam students do not prepare for it, and NAEP results show that most American students are woefully lacking in higher-order thinking skills.

Although some education advocates, such as the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, criticize NAEP for its over-reliance on a multiple-choice format, others believe it is adequate for measuring overall educational progress. However, the political mood in Washington currently favors testing individually every student in the country as a way to motivate both students and schools to improve learning. As part of his 1991 education agenda, President Bush introduced legislation that proposes an individualized version of the NAEP exam to be given to all 4th, 8th and 12th graders beginning in the fall of 1994.

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Most education advocates, the Educational Testing Service that develops NAEP, and even some members of President Bush's administration object to this use of NAEP. They fear that NAEP will be destroyed as a reliable indicator of educational progress if its content is changed. They also worry that such rapid change of NAEP into an individual exam would rely heavily on a multiple choice format, making it subject to the kinds of problems noted above with other standardized examinations.

National Council on Education Standards and Testing

The Unites States education system is much more locally controlled than that of most other industrialized countries. States have the power to make regulations and mandate programs, but most decisions are left up to local education authorities. The issue of a national exam or a national assessment system has focused attention on the tension between local and national control and initiative.

Earlier this year, Congress and the Governors' National Education Goals Panel, a coalition of all the governors that works towards progress on the six education goals, created a task group called the National Council on Education Standards and Testing. This bipartisan council, composed of elected representatives, educators, state and local officials, and educational organizations, was directed to study the desirability and feasibility of national standards and assessment, and to report its findings by the end of 1991.

Current Proposals for a National Assessment System

In both political and educational circles there is tremendous momentum for testing reform with two common elements: establishing standards and then requiring every student to meet those standards. Some hope the creation of standards and high stakes assessment will drive education reform by increasing accountability and expectations; others see standards, assessment and accountability as a necessary part of the reform effort but not a driving force. Most acknowledge that teachers teach to the test, and therefore agree that changing the assessment system will have an effect on instruction, although there is disagreement over the extent of this effect. Several related proposals for a national assessment have emerged, including:

Defining Assessment

STANDARDIZED TESTS are tests that administer the same questions to large numbers of students under similar conditions. Although the test may include an essay question, they are usually in a **multiple-choice** format. Multiple-choice tests ask students to choose one correct answer and critics claim usually do not measure higher-order thinking skills. Students' scores may be compared to other students who have taken the exam, which is called norm-referenced, or they may simply indicate whether the child has mastered a specific subject, which is called criterion-referenced.

STANDARDS in the context of this discussion on national education reform means the development of achievement goals for all students. These goals will include specific factual knowledge, basic skills and the ability to perform tasks that require higher-order thinking.

ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT is any type of measurement, except multiple choice or true-false. It usually involves extended, multi-step production tasks, such as carrying out a project, and open ended questions without a single correct answer. The students are rated by their own teacher or another teacher according to previously agreed upon standards. There are several different types of assessment:

* **Performance Examinations.** This type of assessment is analogous to Olympic competition. Students and teachers would know the requirements in advance and prepare for them; raters would judge the students performance within a specific time-frame and setting.

* **Portfolios.** A collection of the student's work is maintained and assessed over time either for improvement or towards specific requirements for grade completion. This system moves away from high stakes single testing.

* **Projects.** The student's work on a long term project completed alone or in groups offers the opportunity to assess the student's creativity, planning skills, ability to integrate knowledge, and ability to work with others.

Many states such as Vermont, New York, and California have begun using alternative assessment in schools and studying the feasibility of implementing large-scale state programs.

HIGH STAKES is another word for accountability with consequences. Applied to schools, high stakes may mean the allocation of resources according to test results: more money for schools with high results or improved results. For individual teachers or administrators, high stakes test results may control salary or employment. High stakes for students may result in academic tracking, grade retention, non-graduation, or even denial of employment opportunities based on the examination results. Examples of high stakes testing are: state required graduation or minimum competency exams, teacher certification exams, and a school readiness exam administered to pre-school children. All of these exams have cut-off levels that determine if students graduate, teachers get certified or children can begin school.

* President Bush's plan for an American Achievement Test, or individualized NAEP. As stated above, this option has very little support within the education community or in Congress, which must appropriate funds for the project; however, individual states may decide to institute an individual NAEP-like exam.

* The New Standards Project. Directed by Lauren Resnick of the Learning Research and Development Center and Mark Tucker of the National Center on Education and the Economy, this coalition of states and cities is creating a model for a national assessment system. The proposal involves the development of broadly agreed-upon standards and the use of alternative assessment techniques. The assessment contains three components: a **performance examination**, completion of group and individual **projects**, and an assessment of a student **portfolio**. Since the standards would be widely known, students would be able to prepare for the performance assessments and be allowed to repeat them as often as necessary to pass. Although the groups and individual projects would be calibrated to the national standards, the exact nature of the projects would be left to the teacher or school. They argue that this would avoid a national curriculum and allow for individual creativity on the part of students and teachers. Students would complete projects and earn credits at their own pace--much like the Boy Scouts merit badge system--towards the completion of standards set for the 4th, 8th and 12th grades. In August of 1991, the New Standards Project convened a large group of educators to begin developing standards and assessment models.

* The College Board, which administers the Advanced Placement Exams, indicates that it has begun work on a new set of similar exams called Pacesetters. They describe Pacesetters as a curriculum-specific exam providing both standards and assessments. Unlike the Advanced Placement Exam, which is designed for an elite group, this exam will be designed for all students. There exists the possibility that the College Board and the New Standards Project will collaborate on the development of national standards and assessments.

* The National Council on Education Standards and Testing, with its Congressional mandate and membership from the political and educational arena, has attempted to respond to a variety of concerns. Discussion of standards and assessment has brought out a number of issues:

  - who develops the standards and for what purpose,
  - how quickly should these assessments be put into place,
  - what sorts of high stakes should be attached to success or failure,
  - how can every child be assured of the opportunity to learn to the level of these standards, and
  - how can state and local educational creativity and initiative be fostered.

  The Council has tentatively endorsed a National Assessment System where each state or coalition of states would develop their own assessment system which could then be calibrated to a common standard. While there has not been as in-depth a discussion of the other issues, particularly regarding what sorts of high stakes should be attached to the exams or how to ensure equitable opportunity, there is the understanding that any implementation of this system must be accompanied by extensive teacher training and reform to meet these requirements.

Many of the participants on the National Council are also involved in the New Standards Project and the National Goals Panel, so a great deal of overlap in concerns, methods and recommendations is apparent. Because the New Standards Project receives funding from private foundations, its work will continue and it will serve as a laboratory for many of the ideas proposed by the National Council even if the Council's recommendations are not pursued by Congress. Further, even if the ideas are not adopted on a national scale, many states may also act on these proposals independent of any national consensus.

Evaluation of National Assessment: Concerns and Benefits

Although the education community in general is enthusiastic about alternative assessments, there are still many questions about its place in education reform and particularly about its effectiveness as a reform tool. The following are some of the issues which have emerged in the debate on alternative assessment which still need to be considered or resolved:

* While there has been much discussion of alternative assessments, Eva Baker of the UCLA Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Testing has found that very little practical research had been conducted. Knowledge about design, distribution, quality, and impact of existing programs is limited because current studies focus more on the time frame and feasibility of implementing alternative assessments.

* Baker also states that there is little evidence that performance examinations actually improve learning. Evidence from military literature on performance assessment shows that if the assessment instrument is well known, the task can be broken down into unskilled units learned by rote. Even student projects can become so regimented that they leave little room for student creativity.

* The current impetus for standards and testing has two motivating factors, general accountability and improved teaching and learning. Tests designed for accountability provide general information about how all students perform relative to a standard in a manner that is understandable to the public. Tests to improve teaching and learning provide specific, quick information to a teacher about what each student understands, so the teacher can modify his or her instruction. Some educators feel that general accountability and instructional improvement cannot be combined into the same instrument. Yet many of the new assessment developers are promising that kind of multipurpose test.

* Alternative assessment does not guarantee the end of many educational practices which are detrimental to students, such as tracking and retention. For example, the credit system proposed by the New Standards Project could, without appropriate safeguards, result in the separation of students into different tracks according to how fast they move toward completion of requirements. Repetition of the performance assessment or slow completion of credits could be similar to being held back, which studies have shown contributes greatly to a student's propensity to drop out.

* Many political leaders are pushing for the rapid implementation of some form of an assessment system within three years. Most educators feel that this time frame is much too short; the New Standards Project envisions a timeline of seven years. Another point of contention is whether implementation should proceed in a linear fashion--first a development of standards, followed by development of the instrument, and finally administration of the exam--or in a parallel fashion with all three facets occurring at once.

* There is general agreement among those developing these standards and assessments that they must be accompanied by teacher training and a more equitable distribution of resources among schools before implementing a reward and punishment system. However, many educators feel that the current political environment that is pushing for increased accountability may force high stakes tests to be implemented before students, teachers, and schools have had the opportunity to "level the playing field" through improved teaching and access to resources. In that case, disadvantaged students may be punished for systemic issues beyond their control by inability to advance in grade or graduate.

* There has been far too little discussion about how the establishment of national standards would affect the teaching of limited-English-proficient students, or how these students would participate in alternative assessments.

* There is no way to ensure that the assessment results will not be used for unintended purposes. Currently, for example, the use of SAT scores for college athletic eligibility continues over the objections of the Educational Testing Service which develops the exam and the College Board which administers it.

* The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics has agreed upon national standards for K-12 students of math, but standards in the other academic areas are in various stages of development by their respective councils. A New Standards Project workshop of 450 educators and policymakers held in the summer of 1991 demonstrated that while consensus on standards in the areas of science, writing, and reading may not be too controversial, standards for social studies will probably generate lively debate over multicultural education which may be long in resolving.

* Many child welfare and educational advocates, such as the coalition group Campaign for Genuine Accountability in Education, believe that the political pressure to quickly institute some sort of assessment system may result in a system that relies heavily on standardized, multiple-choice tests. Others, like Linda Darling-Hammond of Teachers College, caution that a poor assessment system in a high stakes environment will worsen the educational opportunities of minority and disadvantaged youth.

Despite these concerns, some of the discussion on standards, assessments, and their implementation is very encouraging--at least at the national level. Much of the possible benefit comes not directly from the structure of a national assessment system, but from the inclusion of some very important issues in the political agenda. For example:

1. There appears to be the general acknowledgement that standards should be developed through a process of broad participation, including educators and parents.

2. The discussion has affirmed that not only can all children learn to the same standard, but that all children should have the equal opportunity to learn.

3. All sides agree that massive teacher-training efforts both in-service and in university schools of education would be fundamental to the implementation of a national assessment system.

It is encouraging that the National Council on Education Standards and Testing included these statements in their discussions.

Recommendations

Testing reform advocates have concentrated much effort on removing standardized tests and replacing them with alternative assessments. Now that national forums such as the National Council on Education Standards and Testing have agreed to the alternative performance and curricular based assessments, the focus will likely be on ensuring that the assessments are developed and implemented properly. The following are a compilation of some suggestions for the development of a national, state or local assessment system put forth by various educators, including Dr. Gregory Anrig, President of the Educational Testing Service; the National Forum on Assessment; Eva Baker of the UCLA National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing; and Lauren Resnick of the New Standards Project. They point to areas where those who advocate for equal opportunity and educational advancement for minorities need to be observant.

1. **Representation and diversity.** Parents, students, teachers, and experts should all be involved in a standards-setting process that reflects the ethnic diversity of the nation. This broad participation should take place at each level of development and dissemination of the standards.

2. **Teacher involvement.** Teachers in particular should be involved in the process of developing standards and the assessment instrument, and teacher training should incorporate the standards and techniques so that teachers can adequately use them as instructional tools.

3. **Parent involvement.** Beyond their involvement in the development of standards, parents should be kept informed of:

   * when national assessments are to be given to their children,
   * what are the probable potential uses of the test results, particularly if "high stakes" assessments are involved, and
   * how are their community's schools faring in teaching children.

4. **Standards before tests.** A solid foundation of standards should be in place before developing measures to assess achievement of those standards.

5. **Beyond standardized tests.** Any assessment system should measure higher-order thinking skills, not just factual knowledge. It should include portfolios, group and individual projects, and performance assessments. Assessment should cover a broad range of skills and be curriculum-based. It should be an integral part of teaching so as to not take time away from classroom learning. The instrument should be flexible enough to encourage local creativity in teaching.

6. **Assessment to improve instruction.** The purpose of assessment should be to improve instruction and learning. In development and implementation of the assessment system, the balance between school accountability and instructional evaluation should favor instruction.

7. **Access for limited-English and handicapped students.** Any assessment system should include specific provisions for limited-English proficient and handicapped students. LEP and handicapped students' special circumstances should be considered from the beginning in the development of new assessments.

8. **Monitoring for fairness.** Standards and assessment systems should be constantly monitored and evaluated to ensure fairness and effectiveness. Do higher standards in fact lead to improved educational outcomes? Has instruction improved and has student interest in learning increased? An independent body, with the power to make improvements, should be set up to monitor the system for fairness and effectiveness.

9. **De-emphasis of "high stakes".** Individual scores should be used only for enhancing learning and instruction, not as barriers to educational opportunity or employment. Students should be given multiple opportunities to meet the requirements so that each administration of an exam is not a high stakes moment.

10. **No tracking.** An assessment system should compliment other areas of education reform and should not be implemented in a way that encourages tracking or retention. Schools and teachers should intervene quickly when a child is first experiencing difficulty.

11. **Clear reporting of results.** Results should be reported in a way that is understandable to parents and students, i.e., not in terms of grade levels or percentiles, but in terms of what the child actually knows.

12. **Reporting school accountability.** If assessment results are reported for student accountability purposes, then they should be accompanied by other relevant information about the student's environment, such as information on curriculum, preparation and evaluation of teachers, school organization, community support, and equity. Schools should be held accountable for providing students with sufficient learning experiences to succeed. These data should also be presented in a form that is understandable to parents and students.

13. **Improvement of education.** Reporting of assessment results should be followed by action at all levels. Teachers should give special attention to students with difficulties and assistance should be given to schools whose students are not progressing satisfactorily.

14. **Community and state accountability.** Accountability should be expanded outside the education arena to include the communities and states who fund and govern the schools. Communities and states, as well as schools, should be held accountable for the educational progress of their young people.

15. **Adequate time.** To create an effective assessment system takes time. A time frame should be adopted that is sensitive to this need. This will involve extending the timeline advocated by most politicians.

16. **Sufficient resources.** Sufficient funds should be allocated to develop and implement all facets of an excellent assessment system. Emphasis should be placed on those elements that will improve instruction, such as teacher training, and increase educational opportunity, such as equitable distribution of funds and resources.

Need for Local Perspectives

Testing reform is occurring in the public and private arena and at all levels of government. While discussion at the national level has accepted alternative assessments as the appropriate path towards the future, discussions at the state level have been very uneven. Some states like Vermont are instituting portfolios for all students, but others like Kentucky and Illinois are not varying significantly from the old standardized tests. Education reformers at the local level must enter more into the testing reform debate so that their proposals for change are not derailed by inadequate assessments. Education reformers can also ensure that equity for all students maintains a central place in the assessment discussion.

Further, the discussion of a national assessment has included discussion of the need for more equitable educational opportunities for poor students, which has given rise to action seeking redistribution of state education resources among districts. Here again local education reformers can join with test reform advocates to enhance the political will to follow through on equitable financing of schools.

Assessment has often been little more than a measure of inferior education and a tracking mechanism for disadvantaged students. However, with the current discussion around high standards and alternative tests, assessments can become part of the drive for quality education for all students if local education reformers--parents, community, business, and educators--add their viewpoints to the national debate.

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